

Lincoln and Emancipation

Developed for the Abraham Lincoln Association [link:
<http://abrahamlincolnnassociation.org/default.htm>]

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(All documents cited in these lesson plans are from the Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln accessed from the main page of the Abraham Lincoln Association [link: <http://abrahamlincolnnassociation.org/default.htm>] web site)

Background

Abraham Lincoln came to office pledged to restrain the growth of slavery. But in his first Inaugural Address he assured Southern whites that he had no intent to free slaves in the slave states, and he pledged to enforce the controversial Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Nonetheless, the seven Deep South states which had seceded prior to Lincoln's inauguration continued their rebellion, and welcomed in four more Upper South states—Arkansas, Tennessee, Virginia, and North Carolina—after the first exchange of shots at Fort Sumter, and the President's subsequent call for 75,000 volunteers to quell the rebellion.

The rebel army was a white man's army; Southern notions of white supremacy precluded blacks from serving (although the South turned to its slaves in desperation in the war's final days.) That did not mean that African-Americans did not aid the Confederate military effort, however. Blacks dug trenches, built fortifications, delivered messages, cooked, washed, and groomed and drove horses for the Confederate forces. Furthermore, slaves continued to labor on plantations and farms, in ports and in factories. In doing so, they freed up white men to fight. They also contributed to Southern production, a critical factor in a war of two economies. As long as the Confederate states held millions of slaves, the Southern war effort would reap the benefits.

A handful of slave states never left the Union. Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri—the so-called “border states”—were coveted by both sides. All but the first came close to secession, especially early in the war. Great rivers ran through these strategically-important states, at a time when rivers were exceedingly important to military operations. (So important that Union armies were named after rivers: the Army of the Potomac, the Cumberland, the Tennessee, the James.) Political infighting in these states was often harsh. Urban violence flared in the streets of Baltimore, St. Louis, and other border states towns, and it was in these critical states that the old truism about

“brother fighting brother” was most valid. Kentucky-born Mary Todd Lincoln had brothers who fought for the South.

The United States Congress, cleared of all but one representative of the seceded states (Senator Andrew Johnson of Tennessee) targeted the slaves of the rebel states twice during the war’s first year. In the First Confiscation Act (1861), Congress ordered Union officers not to return slaves who were being put to use by the rebel forces. A year later, in July of 1862, Congress declared slaves of rebel masters free in the Second Confiscation Act. Neither act led to wholesale freeing of slaves, as Southern whites did not recognize Congressional authority. Also in 1862, Congress abolished slavery in the District of Columbia (with compensation to slave owners), and forbade Union officers to return runaway slaves to their masters.

Congress took the last of these measures to create consistency where there had been confusion. Local Union commanders had pursued different approaches to slaves entering their lines from the war’s earliest days. Army officers in the border states tended to return runaways to their masters. In contrast, the Massachusetts “political general” Benjamin Butler began treating runaway slaves as “contraband” of war as early as May, 1861, two months prior to First Bull Run. In coastal South Carolina, Union seizure of the Sea Islands led to the Port Royal Experiment, in which former slaves worked their own lands, the lands vacated by white masters fleeing the Union invasion of the islands.

From the war’s outset, abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, and Wendell Phillips had insisted that the outbreak of rebellion called for the emancipation of the slaves. As Butler was initiating his “contraband” policy, Douglass said, “The American people and the Government at Washington may refuse to recognize it for a time; but the ‘inexorable logic of events’ will force it upon them in the end; that the war as waged in this land is a war for and against slavery.”

President Lincoln resisted this pressure. When, in August of 1861, another political general, John C. Fremont, declared martial law in response to guerrilla warfare in Missouri, his declaration ordered the seizure of property of known rebels (and the execution by firing squad of certain rebel fighters.) Just in case anyone doubted whether Fremont’s order included slaves, “The Pathfinder” made it explicit: he declared these slaves to be “free men.” Lincoln’s response came in a confidential letter to the general (**Document 1.**) When Fremont refused Lincoln’s request to withdraw the order, the President drafted an order, and eventually removed the general from the Missouri command. Criticized for his stand by abolitionists, Lincoln explained his reasoning further in a letter to a longtime political friend from Illinois, Senator Orville Browning (**Document 2.**)

One year later, Lincoln again confronted the emancipation question. Union forces had won important victories in Tennessee, and had seized portions of the Mississippi, but the war in Virginia had gone poorly. Britain and France, which wanted free access to Southern cotton, seemed poised to intervene, diplomatically or even militarily. The November mid-term elections loomed ominously for Lincoln and the Republicans.

Abolitionists and Radical Republicans criticized Lincoln for failing to act boldly on the slavery question. Horace Greeley, who published the New York *Tribune*, demanded that Lincoln emancipate the slaves in an August, 1862 open letter that he called “The Prayer of Twenty Millions.” Soon after, a delegation of free black leaders, which included Douglass, visited the President at the White House to appeal for emancipation. In his response to these entreaties, (**Documents 3 and 4**), Lincoln revealed much about his thinking on the nature of the war, the slavery question, emancipation, and America’s future as a multi-racial nation.

Lincoln’s answers may surprise your students. When he told free black leaders “it is better for us both that we be separated,” he expressed doubt that whites and blacks could ever live together in equality and harmony in America. Lincoln had long believed in “colonization,” the establishment of settlements overseas for African-Americans. Once a fashionable formula for whites uneasy with slavery—John Marshall and Henry Clay had been members of the American Colonization Society—colonization had seen its greatest achievement with the establishment of the nation of Liberia on Africa’s west coast during the 1820s. Although some American blacks took part in colonizationist enterprises, by and large the idea held little allure for blacks. “Speak to us no more of colonization,” wrote David Walker in his 1829 *Appeal*, “for America is our country as much as it is yours.” Colonization proved a dividing line within the abolitionist movement, and by the 1850s critics such as Douglass, Garrison, and Phillips had seized the initiative. When in 1862 Lincoln suggested that free black leaders lead their people out of America, he espoused a view that had receded into insignificance. Moreover, as African-Americans enrolled in the Union Army and Navy, served as scouts and spies for the Union forces, and strongly supported the war effort, it became ever more difficult to deny them and their families a claim to American citizenship.

It is important to remember, however, that as Lincoln offered these seemingly cold responses, he had already written—but not made public--a preliminary Emancipation Proclamation (**Document 5**.) In July, he had confidentially shared it with his cabinet, but Secretary of State William Henry Seward had advised Lincoln to wait to issue it until after a Union victory. When victory came by the narrowest of margins at the Battle of Antietam, in Maryland on September 17, 1862, Lincoln issued the preliminary proclamation (The preliminary proclamation announced Lincoln’s intent to free slaves in those areas still in rebellion as on New Year’s Day, 1863, unless the rebellion ended.)

Lincoln’s decision came after decades of discussion of what to do about slavery. In the early nineteenth century, opponents of slavery vested their hopes on a program of “moral suasion,” in hopes that slaveholders would voluntarily free their slaves when shown the moral evil of slavery. (Earlier, leaders of the founding generation such as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Patrick Henry had confessed that slavery was a necessary evil, and they hoped to see it end by natural causes). But by the late 1820s, both “moral suasion” and the “necessary evil” schools of thought had given way. A more insistent, aggressive abolitionist, typified by the immediatist William Lloyd Garrison, was on the scene. And the combination of occasional slave revolts and stepped-up abolitionist activity caused white Southerners such as John C. Calhoun to proclaim

slavery “a positive good.” From the 1840s through to the Civil War Americans argued over slavery. Lincoln lived and eventually led a nation of abolitionist immediatists, abolition-minded gradualists, pro-slavery apologists, Northern business interests who feared the impact of abolition on trade, advocates of slavery’s expansion, advocates of slavery’s containment, and nationalists who condemned any agitation of the slavery question as dangerous to national survival. He also presided over a nation of approximately 4,000,000 African-Americans, nine out of ten of whom were slaves at the Civil War’s outset.

The Final Emancipation Proclamation (**Document 6**) ended any prospect of foreign intervention in the war, and it transformed the Union army into an army of liberation. It also led to the formation of all-black regiments in the Union army. These regiments fought with distinction at Fort Wagner, Milliken’s Bend, Port Hudson, and other battlegrounds. It did not free all the slaves; the Thirteenth Amendment would eventually do that. Acting in his constitutional role of Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, Lincoln could only free those slaves in areas still in rebellion, areas in which the freeing of slaves would weaken the Confederate military effort. Thus, the proclamation did not apply in the border states, or in areas of the Confederacy already under Union control. And rebels did not leap to obey the orders of a president whose authority they did not accept.

The Proclamation was the turning point of the Civil War. The war had always been about the restoration of the Union, but now it acquired a dual meaning. It became also a war that might free four million slaves. Americans reacted in a variety of ways. The white South condemned Lincoln’s act. Many more Southern blacks now made the dangerous passage to the Union lines, thus “freeing themselves.” Northern Democrats criticized Lincoln, and even some Republicans joined the chorus. (Lincoln’s response to the latter is found in **Document 7**, his letter to James C. Conkling, an Illinois friend who was due to address a Republican meeting in Lincoln’s hometown of Springfield in the summer of 1863, after the victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg.) Research by historian James McPherson suggests that many white Union soldiers who did not consider themselves abolitionists supported the measure as a means to win the war more quickly, as did General Ulysses Grant.

The sample lesson below asks your students to examine these documents in small groups, discuss and then summarize them. The lesson’s inquiry question spins off a classic historiographical dispute: *Just how valid is it to call Abraham Lincoln “The Great Emancipator? Was he a racist who wanted to deport freed blacks, or did Lincoln really begin to think in terms of blacks as political/social equals?”*

Sample Lesson: Lincoln and Emancipation

To-do activity: As the students enter the room, call their attention to the chalkboard, where you have written, in large letters: “Abraham Lincoln: The Great Emancipator.” Have the students open their notebooks, and begin writing their own notions about that title. What does it mean? Is it truthful? How did he get this title? (You may wish to

display or distribute a popular image of Lincoln as emancipator. Popular prints and political cartoons of the time can be fairly easily found and copied off the Internet, or from illustrated histories of the war or Lincoln biographies.) Give students no more than five minutes for this activity. Take a few minutes to solicit student reactions; chalk some of these assumptions on the board. If possible, return to these at lesson's end.

Small-group document analysis: Introduce the inquiry question for today: *Just how valid is it to call Abraham Lincoln "The Great Emancipator?" Was he a racist who wanted to deport freed blacks, or did Lincoln really begin to think in terms of blacks as political/social equals?* Explain to the students that we will attempt to answer this question by looking at different pieces of a complex puzzle. Small groups will examine some of President Lincoln's writings on emancipation from 1861-63. We'll pool our findings, and then try to answer the inquiry question near period's end.

Documents for this phase of the lesson

Document 1: Letter to John C. Fremont, September 2, 1861

Document 2: Letter to Orville Browning, September 22, 1861

Document 3: Address on Colonization to a Committee of Colored Men, August 14, 1862

Document 4: Letter of Reply to Horace Greeley, August 22, 1862

Document 5: Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation, September 22, 1862

Document 6: Final Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863

Divide the class into six groups. Assign each group one of the documents below. Try to provide each group member with his or her own photocopy, and allow them to mark up the document. (You may wish to assign able readers the longer, more legalistic documents, such as the two proclamations.)

Ask the students to read their own assigned document, once, silently, with these questions in mind:

*With whom is Lincoln communicating, and when is he writing?

*What is Lincoln **doing** in this writing?

*What does he say or do about black people, especially slaves?

*What passage(s) are the most eye-catching? Why?

Have the students quickly re-read the writing, marking the key passage(s)

After each student has had sufficient time, have the students share their responses to the four above questions with their partners. Suggest that all make clear notes for large-group sharing later on. You may wish to assign students the role of "recorder" and "reporter" to exercise control over the group work.

3. Large-Group Sharing and Discussion:

Return to a large-group setting, and remind students of the inquiry question (*Just how valid is it to call Lincoln the “Great Emancipator?”*) If they have not yet written it down in their notebooks, they should now do so.

Coach them to listen closely to each group’s presentation. Under the inquiry question, have them make three columns, marked “yes,” “no,” and “maybe.” As different groups report, students should make notes in the columns as they see fit.

Student reporters may or may not get ‘all’ of the document, or they may misconstrue Lincoln’s words. Be sure to have read each document yourself beforehand. This will allow you to redirect and clarify points that the students may have missed or misunderstood. Encourage student-to-student questioning on the documents.

Once all groups have reported, ask students to review a) their notes, and b) the document assigned them. Then give them five minutes time in which to think and compose a written answer to the inquiry question. During this “directed free write,” encourage students to continue writing until stopped. As we are trying to use writing to clarify thinking, students should not be unduly concerned with mechanics. You may wish to wander around the room to monitor progress, or you may wish to write about Lincoln as Great Emancipator yourself.

At the conclusion of the five minutes, go straight to the inquiry question. Solicit a wide array of student views on Lincoln’s image as the Great Emancipator. As you explore the question, introduce sub questions: what did Lincoln do about slavery, and what did he not do? Why did Lincoln take the actions he did? Did Lincoln free the slaves, did the slaves free themselves, or what?

Bringing Closure:

Documents for this phase of the lesson

Document 7: Letter to James C. Conkling, August 26, 1863

Document 8: Response to a Serenade, February 1, 1865

Distribute **Document 7**, Lincoln’s letter to James C. Conkling (or if time is short, key passages from it.) Have students read the letter, paying particular attention to the segments about African-Americans, and remembering that Lincoln was writing to what modern politicians would call his “base,” his core supporters.

Ask this question: As you read this letter, what’s your closing verdict on Lincoln? Great Emancipator? Reluctant Emancipator? Why do so many people see him as the former?

If time allows: Has your view of Lincoln changed during today’s class? If so, how and why? If not, why are you more convinced that you were right all along? What have you learned, and how have you learned it?